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Bobby Creel to receive SEPC's Lifetime Achievement Award

By

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January 11, 2022

Bobby Creel of [L&M Cos. Inc.](#) has been one of the guiding lights at the [Southeast Produce Council](#) since its earliest days, offering advice and counsel to its leadership, beginning with the council's key founder and first executive director, Terry Vorhees.

This March, the council will recognize him for all that he has done by presenting him with its highest honor: the 2022 Terry Vorhees Lifetime Achievement Award.

The award presentation will take place at the council's annual conference and trade show known as Southern Exposure, set to take place March 3-5 at the Walt Disney World Swan & Dolphin Resort in Orlando, FL. The award is co-sponsored by *The Produce News*.

"Bobby has been such a longtime member of this council, and really a person that I've leaned on for guidance," said David Sherrod, president and CEO of the Southeast Produce Council. "And I know from talking to Terry before me that Bobby was also a counsel for him and was able to give him a lot of reassurance. And that's what Bobby does. He gives you the assurance that what we're doing is the right thing to do."

He continued, "They say that being a mentor is having a brain to pick and an ear to listen — and a

push in the right direction. And that's what Bobby is. We can pick his brain, he listens to what we have to say, and he gives us a little push in the right direction. He's been that for this council, and he currently serves in that capacity by chairing the Board of Governors."

The Southeast Produce Council surprised Creel almost a year ago at Southern Exposure 2021 with a Lifetime Membership Award, but the 2022 Terry Vorhees Lifetime Achievement Award will further salute his longtime dedication and service to the council.

"One of the great things about Bobby is that he is able to give us a different perspective," said Sherrod. "He looks at things differently. He looks at an issue, reviews it, and then he gives us some really good advice. That's why he's been so vital in shaping this council. I think that that's what has made him so effective in helping both Terry and I personally and the council as a whole."

He continued, "Bobby has always — always — put this council at the top of his list. He has a deep concern for how this council will be if we stay true to the principles and values that it was founded upon. He's concerned about making sure that we stick to that. You need 'a Bobby' to make sure that we stick to what got us to where we are and what we were founded upon. To be able to tell him all of this in person, especially in today's times, means a little bit more to me personally."

About the honoree

Creel was born Aug. 2, 1955, in Raleigh, NC. He was raised there and graduated there from high school in 1973. But produce was not on his radar at all. In fact, he was drawn to a very different field: the jewelry industry.

"It started way before high school," he recalled. "Somehow or another, I received a glass test tube bottle when I was a young teenager. And in that glass test tube bottle was a rough diamond. And I was just absolutely amazed by something that was so rare and valuable. I dreamed of someday being involved in that business. I was sitting here in North Carolina, dreaming of traveling the world and being involved in that business. And lo and behold, it came true."

Right after high school, he attended the Gemological Institute of America, one of the leading gemological schools in the world. The main campus at the time was in Santa Monica, CA, but young Creel did not have to go across the country.

"Back in those days, when you went to gemological school, you had to be employed in the jewelry industry," he explained. A lot of young people couldn't get away and travel to be in California. So the institute "would mail the gemstones that you were working on to you to work on the identification and the grading and that sort of thing. All of your quizzes were mailed to you, and you had to take your quizzes in the presence of either a licensed teacher or librarian."

He continued, "I had an uncle and a mentor who was a partner in a chain of jewelry stores located in North Carolina. He blessed me with an opportunity at an early age to manage a jewelry store. When I graduated from the GIA in 1979, I had started with a national company in Richmond, Virginia." That company was Best Products Co., a nationwide catalogue showroom retailer. Creel worked from both the corporate office in Richmond and another office in Midtown Manhattan.

"Best Products Company was my big break in the diamond and jewelry business," he stated. "I was young and very fortunate to move into the roles that they moved me into. The business was growing fast. When I was 27, I was the senior diamond buyer leading a world-class team of talented buyers. We were the third largest buyer of diamonds in the world. I was very fortunate to lead that team at 27

years old."

He left that company in 1984 and co-founded B.C. Mark & Co., a high-end retail business in Richmond, VA. That lasted until the fall of 1994. It was a highly successful business, but "as the years went by, I wanted to get back to North Carolina to be near my family and friends," he said.

And he was looking for a new adventure.

"There was a company called L&M that I didn't know hardly anything about, and a friend of mine was there and some other friends of mine were there that I had grown up with," he recalled. "And there was one particular guy who's been my friend for over 55 years that twisted my arm to join L&M and try something completely different. His name is Mark Falkner. Today, Mark has been there over 35 years."

He continued, "I knew nothing about produce, but I got hooked after two to three weeks. And I never looked back."

He started his career at L&M on Jan. 2, 1995.

"I've worked in just about every part of the company over the years," he said. "It's like a big family."

The family connection actually goes a little deeper. Both of Creel's parents went to high school with Joe McGee, who had founded L&M back in 1964. Creel's father had played football with McGee, and Creel's mother had been a cheerleader. "So I knew of Joe McGee," Creel said. "And that, combined with being able to work with people I had grown up with — it just felt right."

He is currently director of business development, a position he has held for more than 20 years. Creel will be the second person from L&M to receive the Lifetime Achievement Award. McGee was the inaugural recipient in 2008.

Creel met his future wife, Tricia, through her sister. Creel and Tricia had their first date in March 1976, he proposed in May 1976, and they got married on Aug. 29, 1976. They live in Raleigh, NC.

They have three sons. Bobby III, 44, also known as Tripp, is a builder in Richmond, VA. Mark, 40, and Alex, 32, both work at L&M Transportation. They have one grandson, Parker, who is almost two-and-a-half years old. Creel has three younger sisters, all of whom live in North Carolina.

Of his hobbies and interests, Creel said, "I like spending time with my wife and kids. I enjoy an occasional game of golf. I enjoy art for sure." And he very much enjoys reading history, especially the American colonial era.

How did he first become involved with the Southeast Produce Council? "Originally Tom Page reached out to me," he said, referring to another SEPC founder who served as the fifth president (now called chairman) of the board of directors in 2008-10.

Creel served three two-year terms on the BOD, from 2002 to 2008. He served on the Attendance Committee for many years, including as chairman.

And he makes a huge impact as chairman of the advisory group known as the Board of Governors. He had been helping Terry Vorhees for a long time, and when Vorhees became ill in 2014, "David

asked if I would assist him, and that's when the BOG was started," recalled Creel.

When told that he would be honored with the award, Creel said he was "blown away," adding, "There are a lot of people deserving of the Lifetime Achievement Award. I was humbled, proud and shocked. But I -- and I mean 'I in quotes' -- have achieved very little during my lifetime. But we -- 'that's we in teams' -- have achieved a lot. And there are a lot of 'we's' out there to thank. I couldn't have achieved anything without the 'we's' out there."

If Creel has had an impact on the Southeast Produce Council, the opposite is equally true. "I've made a lot of lifelong friends, and I work with a lot of passionate people," he stated. "I've built a lot of relationships. And I pray a lot more. If there's a takeaway to being part of the SEPC, it's that."

He concluded, "I've been so fortunate. In the jewelry industry, I was around the best team in the world. At L&M, I've been around the best team in the world. At SEPC, how can you say that's not the best produce team in the world?"

From the industry

When friends and colleagues of Creel heard the news about his upcoming award, they were, of course, excited for him, but they were not surprised one bit.

"He's so deserving [of this award], and we're proud of him," said John Oxford, president and CEO at L&M Cos. Inc. "I know this means a lot to him. And it's extra special to Bobby because he was such good friends with Terry."

Asked what makes Creel so effective at L&M and in general, Oxford replied, "He always puts the customer first. He keeps us grounded in our pursuit of excellent customer service and customer relationships. And all of that helps us understand better what our customers' needs are."

The CEO said that part of L&M's success model "includes a phrase which is 'to create value by delivering solutions to the produce industry,' and he helps us do that by understanding what the customers' needs are and what's really going to add value to them. And in turn, we believe that we help our customers be successful, and they'll help us be successful."

The L&M executive also touched on how Creel interacts with his colleagues at work. "He has a certain gravitas," said Oxford. "He relates well to folks young and old. He's fun — and I still believe there's a place for that in the workplace."

He continued, "He endears himself to people. People respect him but they also like to have fun with him as well. I think the younger folks look up to him; they respect the relationships that he has and the way he conducts business with the customers. He helps our young folks learn the ropes, so to speak, of the industry. He connects with people and he follows through, which is kind of a lost art these days."

On a more personal level, Oxford noted "just how much Bobby cares about his family — Tricia and his sons. Bobby places a lot of emphasis on the family side. To me, family should come before work, and he lives that. You know he's a granddad, and there's certainly a lot of pride there as well. He talks about Parker often."

Oxford also said, "We've been real proud of Bobby in the way he has represented L&M but also the industry over all. Having been involved with SEPC since its inception, he's just been a real strong

asset to that organization over the years. He's helped SEPC, and SEPC has been a big asset to L&M. We're proud of the way Bobby has carried that torch for us, representing L&M and the industry."

Teri Miller, category manager at The Fresh Market, had known Creel for a number of years, but it was at SEPC that "I began to know him better," she said. "He's very much a gentleman. I really appreciate that about him, and I respect that about him. He's a great listener, and he doesn't judge. He treats people fairly, in a God-fearing way."

When Miller was president (now called chairman) of the SEPC board of directors in 2016-17, she worked more directly with Creel. "Bobby was always there in the background," she noted. "He's always been that person -- a quiet leader. So I always went to him for feedback and those kinds of conversations. He's always been there to help keep me focused."

Steve Williams has been in produce retailing for more than 40 years, mostly with Delhaize America, but around 2015 he joined L&M as director of new business development. He was there for about two-and-a-half years and had the opportunity to work with Creel. In July 2018 Williams joined Southeastern Grocers Inc., headquartered in Jacksonville, FL, as vice president of produce and floral.

"In our careers and lifetime, we come across some people who really mean a lot to you, who stick with you," said Williams. "Bobby is one of those people."

When Williams first met Creel in 2004, "I didn't know him from Adam," he recalled. "But from the very get-go, I just had a good feeling about his knowledge and the way he conducted business. From that day on, we just built an unbelievable relationship over the years. That means a lot to me."

Williams added, "He's a heck of a teacher. He's got a unique personality and a way of seeing things that makes the whole relationship so trustful."

Asked what he considers Creel's most important strengths, Williams didn't hesitate. "For me, when I think about Bobby Creel, I grade him on three things, and always have. First, his business savvy; I think he's one of the best. Second, he's trustful, and I underline that. And third, he's a true partner to help you grow your business."

He added, "I have a lot of faith and confidence in his knowledge. He's the kind of person I go to if I have any issues. The guy's just got the greatest personality. He can step it up when he needs to step it up, but he's well balanced. He's a phenomenal leader in our industry."

On a more personal level, Williams stated, "He's always impressed me about his family values. His wife, Tricia, and his kids — he always talks about them. That's important to me."

Rick Estess, business development manager-Southeast at RPE Inc., and Creel also go way back. As Estess put it, "We've known each other for so long, it's hard to remember when we first met. I'm sure it was at one of the early SEPC events. It's like Bobby has always been there and been a part of SEPC and our life."

Estess has relied on Creel over the years for many reasons. "Bobby is a good listener," said Estess. "He thinks things through, he sets a plan and then works that plan. All good qualities of a great leader."

In describing Creel on a personal level, Estess said that his friend may be described by one word: dependable. "If Bobby tells you something, move on to something else," said Estess. "That one is handled."

Asked how Creel has contributed to the Southeast Produce Council, Estess replied, "Bobby has been one of the SEPC generals. Not only has he been a very active member for 20-plus years, he has served on the BOD, chaired many committees — one being the very important Attendance Committee — and now serves as the chairman of the Board of Governors. All integral parts that make SEPC what it is today."

Estess teased his friend a bit by saying, "Bobby's golf game is not that good, but Bobby is the most fun on a golf course. I've cherished the time we have spent together."

Estess concluded with these thoughts about his friend. "Bobby loves his family, and when I say his family, I'm talking not only his immediate family of Tricia and their children, but his extended family of co-workers and friends. I've seen over the years that no matter what the sacrifice, Bobby has always been there for many people, and I am thankful to have him in my life. When I look at Bobby Creel today, I see that same person (plus a pound or two and a few more gray hairs) that I saw 20-plus years ago. When you look at all of the boxes that need to be checked off to receive this award, Bobby checks those boxes and many more. Congratulations my friend, well deserved."

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